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Vietnam War drags on at L.A. seminar

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Los Angeles — The only similarity between Vietnam and Southern California, aside from palm trees, is rain.

In Los Angeles, in fact, it's been raining for days, a clear, cold, almost refrigerated rain. Along the beach at Malibu, movie stars' houses were washing away, and down the coast in Santa Monica, where Tom Hayden and Jane Fonda live, brand-new Porsches lay half-buried in mud.

The rainy season has turned L.A. into a giant quagmire, but as a special effect it was the perfect backdrop for a conference to reconsider the Vietnam War.

More than 100 journalists, scholars, government advisers and ex-CIA agents met here last week to discuss the subject. Some made intellectual peace with one another; some took up disputes where they left off a decade ago.

"It's been more than 10 years since the United States stopped fighting in Southeast Asia," said Harrison Salisbury, retired *New York Times* correspondent. "I think most people have tried to forget that the war ever happened. Perhaps the time has come to resurrect it."

Daniel Ellsberg, who supplied the top-secret Pentagon Papers to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in 1969, agreed. "We have to confront Vietnam," he said. "We can't run from what we did."

The University of Southern California, which sponsored the four-day meeting, was swarming with people interested in the war. (Last month marked the 10th anniversary of the end of direct U.S. military involvement in Vietnam.)

"I wouldn't have predicted anything this big," Mr. Ellsberg said after the first day of talks. "It really tells me the perspective is changing."

Others, who spend more time on the lecture circuit, said they weren't surprised by the turnout.

The Vietnam War is suddenly popular, and for many invited participants, explaining the war has become a full-time job. The most common response to

the question "What do you do?"
"Speak."

A few participants, like David Dellinger, arrested in 1968 as one of the Chicago Seven, have been at it for a long time. Mr. Dellinger, whose beard makes him look like Captain Ahab, has stayed with the peace movement, while many of his '60s friends have forsaken it. He says he isn't bitter or resentful.

"I was lucky, I suppose. I was older than most of them were. I didn't let it go to my head. I'm not happy with what some of the others are doing. But I would never say anything against them."

As the conference went on, however, charity toward former colleagues was the exception rather than the rule.

In a panel discussion entitled "The Role of the CIA in Vietnam," Frank Snepp, the agency's chief strategy analyst in Saigon during the early 1970s, portrayed his bosses as their own worst enemies.

"When you believe your own propaganda," he told the audience, "the only one you fool is yourself."

Mr. Snepp, author of the book "Decent Interval," has become, since resigning from the agency, something of a spy left out in the cold. "Everything I write has to be submitted to the CIA for approval — novels, screenplays, everything."

He says he's \$50,000 in debt and still feeling the effects of his losing court battle over what he can and cannot say about his past occupation.

"You don't know what it means to be hassled until you've been sued by the government," he said.

Seymour Hersh, who broke the story on the My Lai massacre in 1970, now feels "the press is irrelevant. I think the Pentagon Papers show that there's not much reporters can do when the government decides to lie. Politicians have such awesome power. I don't know, maybe we're all doomed."